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## Syncretism of modern *Concheros*: Some thoughts

### Abstract

Concheros are one of the most interesting examples of the cultural and religious syncretism of modern Mexico. The main aim of this article is to present the theoretical basis for the possibility of interpretation of this phenomenon and its interpretation in anthropological terms. In this context, the analysis has been subjected to the phenomenon of magic, ritual and cultural memory in relation to *danza de la conquista*. The authors present a brief history of the tradition of the ritual dance in the colonial and modern communities, trying to understand their meaning and significance as a cultural activity and religious syncretism.

**Keywords:** México City, Roman Catholicism, ritual, dance, *concheros*, syncretism

*Ich würde nur an einen Gott glauben, der zu tanzen verstünde.*

I would believe only in a God who knows how to dance.

(Nietzsche 2011: 257)

The problem of cultural theory and methodology of anthropological research remains an important aspect of studies in social sciences and cultural studies. In a series of papers it is visible to formulate conclusions based on widely accepted research perspective. In this article we want to present some reflections regarding the so-called magical theory of culture, with our own range of anthropological observation, made during our numerous visits in México City. On this canvas we

will analyze cultural syncretism of *concheros*, which includes the phenomenon of magic in the culture and syncretism of the modern Ciudad de México, which is the heritage of its rich past and multithreading past. However, our approach to the research and methodological value of our observations is also a case of study. As archeologist, that raised in the continental tradition we are faced with many problems. At the outset, it seems necessary to us to outline a few words of explanation regarding our understanding of the phenomenon of syncretism from the title of this essay. By syncretism we understand the inextricable connection between two or more cultures (Nowicka 1997: 109–111). In Mesoamerica syncretism is common. But its origins date back not in the time of conquest, but far earlier. The tradition of economic and political dependence, in pre-Columbian México culture created almost perfect conditions for further cultural fluctuations. However, these cultural systems were not so alien, as in the case of dissonance between the Spanish conquistadors and the communities of the New World. The tension between the new religion and old rituals were not so visible. One of the most important cases of syncretism is an example of the unification of the Catholic religion and traditional beliefs of the inhabitants of Mexico and other Spanish colonies (Walendziak 2008: 246–256).

## Introduction: Theory of research

### I. Syncretism

For us, the problem of interpretation of various cultural phenomena through the lens of material culture and cultural interaction is not new. The analysis of archaeological finds assumes the interpretation of things, whose producers have no longer exist. In this context we have to find a connection between past reality and objectivity of archaeological data. As an extremely fruitful, and indeed necessary, in this case of interpretation of the prehistoric communities (mostly preliterate), we consider the use of the anthropological analysis and its analogy to past community. In archaeology a conviction about magical model of culture is almost a scientific fetish. As it is noted by Anna Pałubicka, who is archaeologists, it seems to be natural bond between material culture, and the sphere of the general culturality (Pałubicka 2000: 137). This compound is often basic of far-reaching interpretations. However, according to this theory of identity, we would like to highlight unity of practices and symbolic activities also in modern societies.

On the ground of theory research of magical cultural model, formed in a number of studies, we could confirm that magic as a cultural phenomena occurs in every culture, but depending on its position, it has a different character (Buchowski, Burszta 1992: 15). In our further comments we would like to confirm this statement. In the case of this topic we have to face the opposite situation, that exist in archaeological practice. Widely understood magic in the culture – the ritual,

rite, myth become the embodiment in front of our eyes, not as an assumption in our heads. For archeologist mentioned situation could be a dream as well as nightmare. Without typologies of finds and material objects we could check our previous views on the functioning of culture.

After the publication of *The Golden Bough* by Frazer, and then a series of Lévy-Bruhl's work in an academic environment has become evident a tendency of correlation between humans activities and magic, called as a syncretism. It concerned only in a case of illogical communities (*sic!*), which in some ways are embedded in a tangle of irrational ideas and practical magic. At this point we would like to underline, that we do not want to refer directly to it. In the contemporary meaning of magical cultures it is evident, however, with bare another trend. As noted above the magical culture should rather be interpreted through the prism of the relative proportions of the various aspects of culture (technical utility, symbolic communication and symbolic-ideological) (Buchowski, Burszta 1992: 17).

We can use a term magical cultures, only if these aspects are absolutely unified in the form of activities – activities which carry a uniform message and effect, constitute a whole. The situation becomes more complex when the starting point of our observation is not a primitive societies where cultural elements are gradually separated. However, as we noted above, we believe that magic is the (often unconscious) part of every culture. In highly developed societies it is often hidden behind a veil of illusion of logical thinking and rationalization. Attempts to explain actions taken an useless tradition (reproduction pattern), so they are nothing other than attempts legitimacy of magic by another type of action and receiving its original meaning. For us it is definitely required to remember a comments made by Peter Winch, regarding the extremely important work of Edward Evans-Pritchard about the Azande community. „The magic does not exist, but the Azande believe in it” – that seemed to Pritchard ended his work. Commenting on it, Winch refers to a number of other anthropological observation. He notes that the rationalism of magical practices lies in the deeply rooted belief concerning their cause-effect relationships, so there is no way to deny them the logic. The resulting effect of cognitive dissonance leads to confusion. From the point of view of researchers deeply embedded in their own culture, we strive to give our interpretations dimension for our logic, rationalism, and would say for certain scientific as Winch has suggested (Winch 1992). It would seem that post-industrial society (or industrial), as one would define today's inhabitants of México City, cannot be interpreted in terms of magical thinking in any way. We are dealing with the public state pulled into the orbit interaction of Western culture, especially by those ones from the north influence of the United States, but also from the perspective of its history – the impact of Europe. The Mexican society is fully modern. In this case, however, we would like to draw attention to the highlighted by many researchers intermediate-type communities (Banaszak, Kmita 1991: 61).

In terms of the classification proposed by the researchers it is difficult to consider contemporary urban society of Mexico, as other than a capitalistic. In this context, we would expect, that there has been a complete separation of the wider

religious aspect of practical activities designed to achieve measurable effect. However, as these authors also note, we cannot avoid interfering phenomena of particular aspects of culture. It is this phenomenon underlies our further argument.

In this comment we would like to make a deliberate generalization, which will serve us to build further interpretation. Intentionally we would like make a resignation of distinguishing culture in three main aspects of it, to indicate a separation of culture to its dual nature, which consists in the division due to the type of activities – instrumental imperatives, which include economics, normative activities, educational and political, while the second sphere of culture – knowledge, religion and magic are closely related to the integral imperatives (Malinowski 2000: 61). The object of our further studies will be exactly the phenomenon described by Bronisław Malinowski as integrative imperatives, and more specifically detail the phenomenon of magical ritual.

According to Jan Assmann and his theory of cultural memory, this problem seems to move three basic elements of the „framework of social memory” (Halbwachs 2008). In addition to the natural meaning of culture, a sense of community, including memory, described as a reference to the history, shaping the collective identity and building cultural continuity. Assmann called this whole as „conective structure”. It has connect people both in the group (as a community) and over time. The products of this structure are hope and memories, enriched with narration: the mythical and historical (Assmann 2008: 32–36), although in this case you can also venture to say that the ritual took on a symbolic character.

Now let's pay attention the ritual in the context of sociological research. Basically, the concept of magic, religion and ritual in everyday language is used interchangeably. In anthropological terms all of those terms have different meaning. As already we noted, magic is an impersonal action. You can not consider the sacrifice to the gods, songs of praise, or pray as magic, this is an example of religious behavior. In the case of magic we could consider interactions between whisper, spells or divination. Nevertheless, it is significant that the same ritual has a dimension of both activities associated with the sphere of the broader *sacrum* (Nowicka 1997: 441–446). Citing sociological definitions of ritual, it is a form of rite, which inevitably accompanies the *sacrum*, and its form in addition to the special importance to social integration is almost always associated with the activities of a religious nature. For the ritual is significant symbolic value of its expression and its repeatability, reproducibility and even the predetermined pattern and order (Jestal 2011).

There are two basic views on the origins of the ritual - the first of which enshrines the primacy of myth over ritual. As a phenomenon, the ritual would be nothing more than a reflection of the already known forms, which is played back one more time. The second one is about the fact that the myth was created on the canvas of ritual, and the ritual activities represents its rational reflection (Jestal 2011: 163).

However, in a broader sense, the origin of the ritual may be of symultanic. Intellectual explanation, rationalizing facilities which are symbolic actions, could

arise parallel to the ritual itself, or in a short span of time. To the existence of some form of rituals, it is necessary impetus – a belief – which are the beginning of a interaction. It is difficult to imagine the same ritual as a mere routine, which eventually took on the meaning of the mythical and just simply would be impossible without the existence of magic, ritual space. Each existing next to each other standards have in some way complement to date, legitimize to pay attention to the importance of the *sacrum*. All aspects of ritual-mythical would then some kind of patchwork. The core of „fabric” remains unchanged, consists of two complementary parts – the myth and ritual manifestations. But time is passing by, and some new elements are „stitched” to core. More and newer „patch material” became the same fabric – and just as the ritual and myth, the image formed changing the fabric. Although the core still lies at the center of the primary fabric. This parallel explains both the human desire to maintain continuity, reproduction, behavior, as well as their change.

Significantly for Assmann is a reference to the work of Maurice Halbwachs and his thesis about the social form of memory formation. For both authors, memory is part of the socialization of society. As rightly pointed out, cultural memory, in spite of its individual character (only individuals have the possibility of storing memories), a form shaped by the community. How, then, should be interpreted forms of rituals taking place in the historic center of Mexico, including those referring to the pre-Columbian rites, but also those completely new?

## A method of conducting observation

### II. Syncretism

In the above section of the article we made some comments on the syncretism of magic and ritual and their places in the culture and the possibilities of interpretation. In this section we use our observations. In this case, cited insights and our personal reflections may be partial verification.

*Plaza de la Constitución (zócalo)* is undoubtedly tourist center of modern México City. The great square in the heart of the historical area of the city. On the other hand, the zócalo was most important place at the a former Tenochtitlan – the capital city of the Aztecs. Here, under archaeological layers and colonial architecture, relics of the most important pre-Columbian constructions are hidden. This is the space of our observations. Heart of hustle and hurried city life. This is also a scene discussed by us as a ritual space. Almost like in Erving Goffman's vision of the scene, which is located in the urban space, *zócalo* becomes a place of interaction of *concheros*, Mexicans and tourists. The common act of communication is not free of patterns, determined by Goffman's cultural questionnaire. And so, by analyzing individual components of this phenomena, it is almost like acting in theatre, and actors aim to exert maximum impression on the viewer (Goffman 2006).

And so, as tourists, we witnessed the ritual. Initially, standing on the sidelines assumed the function of a passive observer. In the end, however, the accompanying dance music meant that we wanted to become part of the „performance”. Thanks to the kindness of dancers we could become at the moment part of their world – the world of dance and music. It is significant that, in part, a *concheros* interaction is a desirable phenomenon. This enabled us to look from the inside syncretism, which we have also celebrated.

In this case, we had contact and anthropological magic, which is part of the rituals, but also the events and performances taking place almost before our eyes, as well as those in which we can take an active part. As already we pointed out, characteristic of our observations is interaction. The rituals take place in the squares and streets, causing the active position of the viewer (not only us) become part of the rite. It is like a scene in which the ritual take place.

This event prompted us to try to find a sense of ritual dance. On subsequent occasions we tried somehow to take part in the rite. During our several visits in México City we were talking with the dancers, we also tried to get to know their history and intention and the reasons of why they became *concheros*. Our observation took on the nature of impulsive and amateur research, which resulted we discuss in this article.

In this work he wanted to describe only one example of syncretism. Cultural richness of México City today in our opinion, a phenomenon worthy of a separate study science, and its full description is essentially impossible in a scientific article (Goffman 2006; Rusek in press), hence our decision to some form of ritual life only signal and attempt to understand its meaning. Nevertheless, we hope that our observations, which are a kind of scientific syncretism (theoretical and observation) become a source of interesting reflection on the ritual dance *concheros*.

## *Concheros* – searching for unity

### III. Syncretism

#### *Syncretism of history and tradition*

We discussed a case in which syncretism serves as a superior feature of dancing. Both during the day and late evening takes place in the center of modern México City. Practiced ethnic dance, known as the *danza de los concheros*, *azteca danza*, *danza la danza Chichimeca* or *de la conquista*, is an attempt to reflect the unity of pre-Columbian and colonial traditions.

However, this dance is the outcome and result of extremely complicated history and cultural patterns of adaptation of pre-Columbian indigenous communities to new, colonial, and now modern national realities. Rauter has suggest that



dance and music are inseparably united with the Aztec rituals, and thus has not only the function of framing visual art, but also an important social functions (Rauter 1984). In addition to enriching the traditional culture of religious songs, and music of the Spanish instruments dealing with religious syncretism dimension of history. Paradoxically rise of the tradition *danza de los concheros*, which is now identified a „back to the roots of culture” should be sought in the revelation quoted by the dancers. In 1531 on the hill of Sangreal horrible battle took place. It was one of many encounters, during war between Indians and Spanish conquest. But this one was unique because of revelation. St. James, and a luminous cross had revealed in the sky in the accompanying voice *El es Dios, venga este las Paz and tierra* („Here is God, let peace come down to this land”).

These words have been interpreted differently by the Indians. Some of them hopes for a rapid restoration of their homeland surrendered to the Christianization. They became warriors of the new religion, while maintaining its previous military organization (same as in a battle). So here we can talk about the beginning of a new form of ritual (its mythical start). That’s what this event will be the core of our fabric, which will be stitched another „patch” – the next events and changes. It is difficult to deny the sentence that here we are dealing with anastomosis of two completely different worlds – the world of Indian with the world of European colonizers. This is the point where the confluence of the two kinds of magic and religion – Indian and more or less the conscious magical aspect of the Catholic faith. As we will try to show here later, it is an emerging ritual became a contribution to the preservation and production of certain forms of collective memory.

In some time the tradition of *concheros* began to spread to other regions of Mexico. It was almost like a principle of the spiritual conquest – the spread of the new Christian religion, but adapted to the Indians, by basing it on the basis of syncretism. Model of Christianity, that was proposed to descendants of the Aztecs, was supposed to be a kind of spiritual empowerment, giving access to the knowledge of ancestors, which was only covered under the veil of Catholic worship. Religious syncretism of *danza de los concheros* manifested by a combination of elements drawn from two cultures and cultures: the traditional beliefs of pre-Columbian along with inspiration stemming from the Spanish Golden Age. In the area of indigenous culture, we can see the continuous use of ancestral beliefs, their rituals, symbolism and poetry, dance, costumes and the adoption of a paramilitary nature of the groups. According Gertrude Kurtath, *concheros* dance through its form and expressiveness of movements and gestures is completely Indian, but the music can be seen very clear as a Spanish influence, manifested even using European musical instruments (Kurath 1960). At the time of the fall of the Aztec empire, the missionaries decided that the previously used instruments are „the work of devil”, thus establishing a prohibition on their use. But time passed by and *concheros* had introduced European stringed instruments, the evolution and adaptation to the Mexican.

From the time when the Spaniards conquered the Aztec state, the mission of *concheros* became strengthening the consciousness of successive generations of traditional dances and music, derived from pre-Columbian times. In the sixteenth century new waves of missionaries of the Jesuit religious orders, as well as Dominicans and Augustinians arrived to Mexico. Here they found and incorporated dance performances and organized religion, taking place in the inside of the church with the participation of the indigenous people of Mesoamerica. Unfortunately, since about 1700, the situation has begun to slowly change, along with more frequent installation of organ inside churches and hiring professional singers. Then the Native American dancers had to move their practices into the atrium or on courtyards, where they were today.

### *Syncretism of space as scene of ritual*

Most groups *concheros* from Mexico celebrate their daily rituals around the Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral of Assumption of Virgin Mary, founded on the most important relics of the Aztec Temple – *Templo Mayor* in the former capital of the pre-Columbian empire – Tenochtitlan. The same as in suggested of Aleida Assmann, places and spaces in some way can authenticate and store memory even in times of collective oblivion. After time of interrupted tradition, pilgrims return to important places for themselves, watching their landscape, monuments and ruins. It leads to „resuscitation”, the place in different ways is reactivated by memory, and memory by a space (Assmann 2009: 113–114).

In this case, the place of the ritual is so important that some dance groups, groups defined by us as *concheros* refers to the movement called *mexicanidad*. Some groups of *concheros* consciously try to reformulate some aspects of their dance, matching the ideological plane to the resulting traffic in recent years to nationalism mainstream preach the revival of pre-Columbian culture by rejecting everything what is colonial and modern. Whether most of groups of dancers are beyond the new Mexican nationalism.

Nerveless in addition to performances at the *zócalo* there is other tradition among the dancers – pilgrimages. Four times a year there is a great opportunity to meet all of these people in the most important catholic sanctuaries: Chalma, Guadalupe, Cholula and Iztapalpa. This tradition has undoubtedly roots date back to pre-Hispanic times, when it was very popular in Mexico. In pre-Columbian times, people went on pilgrimage to the holy places, such as Martínez Mar'm, Piña Cham or Teotihuacan – the place where they believed the gods were born. Significant religious event were also traveling in search of peyote by groups Huicholes, who for this purpose went to Wirikuta, but also the memory of walking Aztecs in search of a suitable place to settle down – their new motherland.



### *Syncretism of past and modern time*

Nowadays many of the dancers do not want to make their performance only as a folklore used in order to promote the tourist capital. They want that ceremony was retained power and effectiveness of their activities, which in the form of the final are likely to achieve harmony between people, nature and the cosmos. Each ritual begins with the magical exoneration and incensing the participants, which is the appropriate introduction and proceeded by ritual. In addition, the dancers believe that through appropriate measures ritual are able to, for example, bring the rain. Each dance, which is a kind of prayer participants can be played only at the specific, special occasion, under the rules communicated to them by their ancestors. If further delve into the meaning of their dance, this finding any in the many remains of old beliefs, hidden in the belief that in many respects they are similar to the current Catholic religion. *Concheros* are convinced that when they celebrated the ceremony „light struggling with darkness, knowledge from ignorance, freedom from oppression, and all this in order to achieve a state of cosmic integration” (Shank 1974: 56–70).

For the dancers is very important to balance and contact with the world that give the feeling that singing and dancing are in harmony with the movement of the universe. In pre-Hispanic times, both of these elements were determined name *In cuicatli in xochitli* („song and flower”) because they were considered a form of sacrifice, which allowed to maintain contact with the gods manifesting itself in nature. Dancing was especially exalted, because it was perceived as a form of perfect concentration in motion, which can offer by channeling energy that is produced at the time of ritual action. In dance we can always find a reference to the four elements, and each movement choreography has its meaning.

Each part of the dance or stand has a correspondence with music. During the vigils, consisting of private rituals to honor the dead, ceremonial songs are sung in special moments, for example when laying altars with flowers or before the start of the dance, in turn, when you call the souls of the dead are accompanied by the music itself.

In the center of the circle is a place for the captain, who from that place can supervise dance, and priestesses. In this place there are also those who plays drums and other percussion instruments or concha. It is also the space where the altar is set, around which participants dance and pray – on the ground they put a square piece of cloth on which the incense symbolizing fire and smoke flowing from it to represent both concentrically spreading through the wind and the human soul. Next there is also a shell symbolizing water and corn on the cob corresponding to the ground. While celebrated rituals, both burning flame all the time, and the sound of drums, they personify the fire, which is one of the most important symbols *danza de los concheros* – is a visible sign of the sun, and the dancers in the performance of their celebration, turn into orbiting the planet.

Some groups of *concheros* are more catholic, other – less, but most dancers are considered to be believers of Catholic Church, but also preserving the memory

of the Aztec ancestors. Before each dance, and after him, prayers ascend to God, whom they acquired from the arrival of the Spaniards. Activity of *concheros* is especially important now, when in Latin America points to an increase in the number of sects that adapt to the needs of Indians use their need to confirm strengthen their own identity.

## Conclusions: Where is magic?

The starting point of our considerations were thoughts about positions of magic, ritual and religion in culture. At the end of our essay, we would like to answer the question of what is the place of them in syncretic ritual dance *concheros*. As we said at the beginning, magic is a part of every culture. Sometimes it is conscious or not. If so unusual ritual, which is the *danza de la conquista* we can observe magic deeply hidden. It is not visible at first glance. During our observations, after entering the world of *concheros* deeper, we found it. Impersonal spells, rituals and activities dancers – consisting of purification spells, attempts to bring rain to the earth, or the achievement of cosmic balance are nothing like the magic just read in anthropological terms. It was difficult to us to make an interpretation of the words (spell) beginning history *concheros* and each of their dances. It refers both to a personal Christian God, just as the Mexican land, which the dancers want to renew, to give it peace.

Also ritual meaning of dance was hard to understand. As already mentioned, it was part of the Aztec rituals, festivals, public events. However, the gods gave people dance. They dance in their own. We began this essay with Friedrich Nietzsche's quote. We also don't believe in God, who can't dance. And because of it, is difficult to imagine that dance could not previously exist, and it can be expected that its sacred character has always existed.

We also wanted to present our vision of how the ritual of *concheros'* dance was created. Hence, quoted several examples and metaphors patchwork material. In fact, core of our history is immutable. This is one event in 1531, which is still an important element of dance. Fabric material formed around the Aztec history is the result of continuous sewing on new elements, ideas and memories – that is its syncretism.

In the Western tradition used to be say that the winners write history. However, the creation of history relies heavily on abstraction, memory (cultural) and on the specifics. The ideas must gain physical symbol to become the objects of memory. And perhaps the Spaniards conquered the Aztec state indeed. Nevertheless, by *concheros* – so rich and syncretic tradition modern Mexico remains a country where pre-Columbian culture is still alive.

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Ill. 1. An altar of *Concheros* in *zócalo*, México City



Ill. 2. Purification of new dancer with smoke and copal in *zócalo*, México City





Ill. 3. Dance of *Concheros* in *zócalo*, México City



Ill. 4. Dance of *Concheros* in *zócalo*, México City